

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An advertisement distribution system for distributing advertisements to a multiplicity of client devices via a communications network, the system comprising:
 - at least one ad server that stores the advertisements to be distributed to the client devices, each advertisement being stored in a storage location designated by a source address;
 - at least one playlist server that receives a playlist request from each of the client devices, and that transmits a playlist response in response to each received playlist request; and
 - wherein the playlist response transmitted to each client device includes at least one playlist that identifies advertisements to be downloaded by that client device.
2. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the communications network comprises the Internet.
3. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein each of the client devices is equipped with software that effects communications with both the system for distributing advertisements and with a data communications service provider.
4. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the software is subsidized by revenues attributable to the downloaded advertisements.
5. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an e-mail service provider.
6. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an Internet service provider.
7. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the software is e-mail software.

8. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 7, wherein the e-mail software is subsidized by revenues attributable to the downloaded advertisements.

9. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an e-mail service provider.

10. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an Internet service provider.

11. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 7, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an e-mail service provider.

12. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the advertisement distribution system is operated by a producer of the software.

13. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the advertisement distribution system is operated by a vendor of the software.

14. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 12, wherein the software is e-mail software.

15. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 13, wherein the software is e-mail software.

16. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein:
the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and
the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by the vendor of the software.

17. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein:

the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and
the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or
more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by an entity other than the
vendor of the software that has granted the vendor of the software and its clients access to its
ad server(s).

18. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least
one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device contains a list
of ad identifiers that identify respective ones of the advertisements to be downloaded by that
client device, and a list of corresponding source addresses that identify the corresponding
storage location from which each respective advertisement can be fetched by that client
device.

19. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein:
the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client
device contains ad display parameters; and
each of the client devices displays at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements in accordance with the ad display parameters contained in the at least one
playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to that client device.

20. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 19, wherein the ad
display parameters specify, for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of
the downloaded advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a
given time period, and how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that it is
displayed.

21. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 19, wherein the ad
display parameters specify, for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of
the downloaded advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a
given time period.

22. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 19, wherein the ad
2 display parameters specify, for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of
the downloaded advertisements, how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that
4 it is displayed.

23. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 19, wherein the ad
2 display parameters specify, for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of
the downloaded advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated advertisement
4 should not be displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated advertisement
should not be displayed.

24. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 20, wherein the ad
display parameters specify, for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected
ones of the downloaded advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated
advertisement should not be displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated
advertisement should not be displayed.

25. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 19, wherein the ad
display parameters specify, for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of
the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to
4 be displayed.

26. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 20, wherein the ad
2 display parameters specify, for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected
ones of the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that
4 advertisement is to be displayed.

27. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 24, wherein the ad
2 display parameters specify, for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected
ones of the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that

4 advertisement is to be displayed.

28. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 request received from each client device includes an identification of a current playlist(s) for
that client device, and the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server in
4 response thereto includes either status data that indicates that client device's current playlist(s)
is valid and does not need to be augmented, or a new playlist(s).

29. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 18, wherein the
2 playlist request received from each client device includes an identification of a current
playlist(s) for that client device, and the playlist response transmitted by the at least one
4 playlist server in response thereto includes either status data that indicates that client device's
current playlist(s) is valid and does not need to be augmented, or a new playlist(s).

30. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 29, wherein each of
the client devices compares the ad identifiers listed in its current playlist(s) with the ad
identifiers listed in its new playlist(s), generates a list of source addresses for the
advertisements corresponding to the ad identifiers in its new playlist(s) that are different from
the ad identifiers contained in its current playlist(s), and then fetches the advertisements
corresponding to the generated list of source addresses from the appropriate storage locations,
over one or more advertisement download sessions.

31. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least
2 one playlist server receives the playlist request from each of the client devices at prescribed
playlist check intervals.

32. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 29, wherein the at
6 least one playlist server receives the playlist request from each of the client devices at
prescribed playlist check intervals.

33. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 32, wherein each of

the client devices compares the ad identifiers listed in its current playlist(s) with the ad identifiers listed in its new playlist(s), generates a list of source addresses for the advertisements corresponding to the ad identifiers in its new playlist(s) that are different from the ad identifiers contained in its current playlist(s), and then fetches the advertisements corresponding to the generated list of source addresses from the appropriate storage locations, over one or more advertisement download sessions.

34. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 33, wherein each advertisement download session is limited to a prescribed maximum time duration.

35. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the advertisements comprise advertisement files each of which includes an image.

36. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 35, wherein each image comprises one of a GIF image, a PNG image, and a JPEG image.

37. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist server receives from each of the client devices a respective cookie containing information relating to user/client device behavior and/or user demographics specific to that particular client device.

38. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the respective cookie received from that client device.

39. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device based at least partially on monitored behavior of that client device.

40. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device based at least partially on user demographics.

41. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device is customized to that client device.

42. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device is tailored to that client device.

43. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein:
the playlist request received from each client device includes client information; and
the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to that client device based at least partially on the client information included in the playlist request received from that client device.

44. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist response transmitted to each client device further includes a client information portion that instructs that client device with regard to handling of the playlist(s) included in the respective playlist response received by that client device.

45. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 29, wherein the playlist response transmitted to each client device further includes a client information portion that instructs that client device with regard to handling of the playlist(s) included in the respective playlist response received by that client device.

46. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 45, wherein the client information portion of the playlist response transmitted to each client device includes a merge/not merge data field that has a first state and a second state, whereby that client device

4 merges its new playlist(s) with its current playlist(s) in response to the first state of the
merge/not merge data field, and does not merge its new playlist(s) with its current playlist(s)
6 in response to the second state of the merge/not merge data field.

47. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes usage data
relating to the amount of time that the user has engaged in at least one monitored activity
4 over a prescribed most recent time interval.

48. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 47, wherein the at
2 least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response
transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the usage data included in the
playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from that client device.

49. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes a user data
field that includes information identifying the software installed on that client device.

50. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes a user data
field that includes information identifying an operating platform of that client device.

51. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 49, wherein user data
2 field included in the playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from each
client device further includes information identifying an operating platform of that client
4 device.

52. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes usage data
relating to the amount of time that the user has used the software installed on that client
4 device over a prescribed most recent time interval.

53. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the at
2 least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response
transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the usage data included in the
4 playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from that client device.

54. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes a display
time remaining data field that specifies the total amount of display time required for the
4 advertisements that remain to be displayed by that client device.

55. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes a display
time used recently data field that specifies the total amount of times that advertisements that
were displayed by that client device during a prescribed latest time interval.

56. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 55, wherein the
prescribed latest time interval comprises the present day.

57. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes client
device display screen data that specifies dimensions of a display screen associated with that
4 client device.

58. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 57, wherein the
2 dimensions include the height, width, and depth of the display screen, in pixels.

59. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein each of the
2 client devices includes a custom installer function that generates a distributor identifier that
identifies a distributor that distributed the software installed on that client device.

60. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 59, wherein the
playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes
the distributor identifier that identifies the distributor that distributed the software installed on
that client device.

61. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 60, wherein a vendor
of the software uses the distributor identifiers received from the client devices to apportion
revenues attributable to advertisements downloaded by the client devices to distributors of the
software installed on the client devices.

62. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 60, wherein a
producer of the software uses the distributor identifiers received from the client devices to
apportion revenues attributable to advertisements downloaded by the client devices to
distributors of the software installed on the client devices.

63. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
request received by the at least one playlist server from each client device includes ad display
information that identifies the advertisements that have been displayed by that client device
during a prescribed recent time interval.

64. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 63, wherein the at
least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response
transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the ad display information
included in the playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from that client
device.

65. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 55, wherein the at
least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response
transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the display time used recently data
field included in the playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from that
client device.

66. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 54, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the display time remaining data field included in the playlist request received by the at least one playlist server from that client device.

67. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein the client information included in the playlist request received from each client device includes display statistics for advertisements that were displayed and/or advertisements that remain to be displayed by that client device during a prescribed time interval.

68. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein the client information included in the playlist request received from each client device includes information regarding behavior of the client device during a prescribed time interval.

69. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein the client information included in the playlist request received from each client device includes information regarding behavior of a user(s) of the client device during a prescribed time interval.

70. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein the client information included in the playlist request received from each client device includes information regarding activity of the client device during a prescribed time interval.

71. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein the client information included in the playlist request received from each client device includes information regarding activity of a user(s) of the client device during a prescribed time interval.

72. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein:

the playlist request received from each client device includes level of usage data that is indicative of the level of usage of the software installed on that client device during a prescribed time interval; and

the at least one playlist server selects the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted to that client device based at least partially on the level of usage data included in the playlist request received from that client device.

73. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 31, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a playlist request interval data field that specifies the prescribed playlist check intervals for that client device.

74. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 32, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a playlist request interval data field that specifies the prescribed playlist check intervals for that client device.

75. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 33, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a playlist request interval data field that specifies the prescribed playlist check intervals for that client device.

76. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 75, wherein the prescribed playlist check intervals are scheduled independently of the advertisement download sessions.

77. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 75, wherein the prescribed playlist check intervals span a plurality of on-line e-mail sessions during which the respective client device is online for the purpose of sending and/or receiving e-mail messages.

1 78. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a
client information portion that includes an ad history interval data field that specifies the time
4 period for which that client device must remember that it displayed a particular
advertisement.

1 79. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a
client information portion that includes an ad display sequence data field that specifies
4 whether that client device should select advertisements for display in a linear or random
manner.

1 80. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a
client information portion that includes an ad display window data field that specifies the
4 dimensions of an ad display window within which the advertisements are to be displayed on a
display associated with that client device.

1 81. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein:
the advertisements identified in the at least one playlist included in the playlist
response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device include a plurality
4 of regular ads and at least one runout ad; and

the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client
6 device further includes a client information portion that includes a display time quota field
that specifies the maximum display time for which that client device should display the
8 regular ads before displaying the at least one runout ad.

1 82. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist
2 response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a
client information portion that contains instructions for that client device to control the
4 manner in which that client device obtains, handles, and displays advertisements.

83. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 29, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a mix/block data field that specifies whether the advertisements identified in that client device's new playlist(s) can be mixed with previously-stored advertisements from other playlists, or must be displayed as a block.

84. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 29, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a block ad display sequence data field that specifies whether that client device should select advertisements identified in the new playlist(s) for display in a linear or random manner.

85. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 83, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a block ad display sequence data field that specifies whether that client device should select advertisements identified in the new playlist(s) for display in a linear or random manner.

86. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein each of the client devices includes a clickthrough tracking function that, in response to the user clicking on a displayed advertisement, appends a clickbase URI to a URI associated with that displayed advertisement, to thereby facilitate counting of the number of times that the user clicks on that displayed advertisement.

87. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 86, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a clickbase data field that specifies the clickbase URI.

88. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 87, wherein the clickbase URI designates a web page associated with the advertisement distribution system.

89. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 88, wherein the web page designated by the clickbase URI is administered by a vendor of the software.

90. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 88, wherein the web page designated by the clickbase URI is administered by a producer of the software.

91. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes a user-friendly title of each of the advertisements identified in the at least one playlist included in that playlist response.

92. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes an ad type data field that specifies an ad type of each of the advertisements identified in the at least one playlist included in that playlist response.

93. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 92, wherein the ad type is one of a regular ad, a runout ad, a toolbar button ad, or a sponsor placard ad.

94. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device further includes an ad click URI for each of the advertisements identified in the at least one playlist included in that playlist response, whereby the ad click URI specifies a web page to be displayed in response to the user clicking on the associated advertisement.

95. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the at least one playlist included in the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist server to each client device includes a plurality of playlists.

96. The advertisement distribution system as set forth in Claim 95, wherein the plurality of playlists included in the playlist response transmitted by the at least one playlist

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- 4 server to each client device includes at least one playlist for relatively long-lived advertisements, and at least one playlist for relatively short-lived advertisements.